CHECKING OUR AIM
Luke 18:9-14; Matthew 9:9-13
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A news item I saved from the last Olympics tells about the American rifle team and the meticulous preparations they made for that competition. They went into a strict training program, including physical conditioning with rigorous calisthenics. They practiced endless hours on target shooting, of course. But what most caught my eye was the bench testing. Each rifle in turn was mounted firmly on a testing bench so there could be no movement. Then the rifle was fired repeatedly to test how accurately the gun sights were set. That was done not just with new, untried rifles, but with all of them, no matter how familiar the marksman was with his old rifle. Every gun was bench tested to be sure it would shoot accurately where it was aimed.

I thought of the Olympic marksmen because we Christians have just come past Easter. We have again celebrated God's victorious love shown in the resurrection of Jesus. And the question for us now is: How can we each share in that victory? It is a question of how we are aiming our lives. How does our life aim compare with the bench standards set forth by Jesus? First hear how He described the aim of a Pharisee and a tax collector:

> "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner.' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

This parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the Temple is familiar to us, of course. But even so, if we look at it with open eyes, it may hold some surprises.

Two men were involved. One was a Pharisee, an upstanding, respected man, a pillar of the community, a decent man, a model citizen. This man looked down at the other man, a tax collector for Rome, a cheat, a thief, an extortionist, a man despised by all right-thinking people. And the Pharisee, seeing this low-life near him, thanked God fervently for making him, the Pharisee, a better person. In contrast, all the tax collector could pray was a simple and abject "God, have mercy on a sinner like me." Jesus concluded the parable by saying that God accepted the tax collector's prayer, but not the prayer of the Pharisee. The good man's prayer was worthless in God's eyes! I could go on at length to fill in details about the parable. It would be easy to demonstrate that the Pharisee was, in fact, a very different sort of man from the tax collector. His prayer was honest and truthful, for his way of life really was wholesome and religious. On the other hand, the tax collector really was a scoundrel who made his living by corrupt dealings, by graft and bribery. And still Jesus judged them as He did!

Do we feel wonderment at this? Would we want to argue the point with Jesus? After all, the Pharisee was just the sort of person we would like to have living

next door, the kind of individual we would seek as a friend. In Jesus' day the Pharisee was accepted as the very model of a good citizen and a strong churchman. He was the one you pointed to and told your son you wanted him to grow up like that.

Furthermore, the parable doesn;t have any ending to tell us whether the tax collector's prayer made any difference. Did it change his life after all? We can easily imagine that the Pharisee went away from the Temple and continued his good works, continued to practice all his religious observances. But what about the tax collector? All he had prayed was, "God, have mercy on a sinner like me." What did he do after leaving the Temple? Nothing is said. He was a scoundrel when he entered the Temple; why should we believe he suddenly became virtuous because of that brief little prayer? Jesus does not say he became an honest, decent man. So what can we think when Jesus condemns the person we feel attracted to and then commends the distasteful crook?

Well, an obvious conclusion to draw is that Jesus believed God sees things differently than we do. Christ's judgment about the Pharisee and the tax collector is precisely the opposite from the way we most often decide, isn't it?

A folk tale from Kashmir in northern India tells about a man who was extemely discontented. One day he was sitting in the shade of a big walnut tree and meditating about how hard life was. On the ground near the tree was a pumpkin vine, and on the vine was a large pumpkin. Seeing it, the man became so agitated that he started to talk to himself.

"Just see how foolish God was when He created things," he grumbled. "If God had been more clever, there would be no misery and suffering in the world. And here is a perfect example of poor planning: this great strong tree has tiny nuts growing on it and that scrawny little vine on the ground over there has a huge pumpkin to bear! What a ridiculous mistake! If it had been up to me, I would have arranged for little nuts to grow on little vines and for huge pumpkins to grow on great strong trees that could support them." Just then a nut fell from the tree and landed squarely on his head. Startled, the man looked up into the tree and thought for a moment. Then he said fervently, "Oh God, forgive me! If one of those big pumpkins had fallen on my head from the top of this tree, it would have killed me! How very wise you really are!"

That realization of God's wisdom is the beginning of human wisdom. It is no trick at all to find numerous instances in each of our lives where we wish things were different. We lament: "Why did God do so and so?" or "Why did God let that happen?" If we can't agree with God at a certain point, we think He has made a terrible mistake. Or we think that maybe there really isn't any God, after all.

But there is another possible conclusion. Perhaps we just don't understand the whole truth. Perhaps we are simply not wise enough to see how God works all things for good.

We can understand that in little pieces sometimes. Certainly anyone struck by a pumpkin falling from a treetop would be able to see that God's wisdom in such matters is greater than ours. Sometimes after a frightening or painful situation, we can see how God was supremely wise. We have all known about people who found a whole new meaning in life in the wake of a serious accident or a critical illness. They began by asking how a loving God could permit such pain. But they ended

thanking God for a new and joyful awareness of life they had not known before. If we are willing to look, God's wisdom can be seen even in the most unhappy, most painful things we experience.

Is there a glimpse of God's unexpected wisdom for us in this strange story of the Pharisee and the tax collector? Let's compare it with another scripture passage, the record of how Matthew became a disciple of Jesus:

> As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. And as he sat at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

As you heard, this story tells how Jesus met one of His twelve closest disciples - in the tax office! Matthew was a tax collector; he earned his living through that unsavory work. What he did was not illegal, but it was certainly immoral. The tax collector's livelihood depended on cheating his fellow countrymen in order to collect taxes required by the Roman government and still have some left over for himself, a lot left over, if possible. He was a collaborator with the enemy power and profited by it. That is the kind of man Matthew was, a despicable tax collector just like the one in the parable we read earlier.

You and I would have nothing to do with such a vile person. Our perspective tells us to steer clear of such people, just as the Pharisee would avoid the persons he considered unclean. But Jesus had a different perspective. He chose Matthew to be one of His twelve closest friends.

Not much is written about Matthew in the New Testament, but the first Christians thought so well of him that one of the four gospels now carries his name. Ancient writers tell of him as one of the strongest missionaries after the crucifixion. That is what one unsavory tax collector became.

You see, when Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, He really knew what He was talking about. He knew very well that a scoundrel like Matthew who opened his life to God could become a real credit to God. And Jesus knew very well that if a person would not see clearly his sins and failures, even if he were the most faithful church member, like the Pharisee, his life would never really serve God. Self-righteousness, even the self-righteousness of a pillar of the community, completely prohibits true service. Can that be why there were no Pharisees among Jesus' disciples?

As a major example of the difference between God's perspective and ours, consider our common idea of the good life: work hard to earn as many of the comforts and luxuries of life as possible, associate with good poeple, mind your own business, protect your good reputation. And yet we Christians remember that our leader did not give a hang about His reputation - He associated with many disreputable people.

Mind His own business? He was constantly messing around in other people's lives. He was a chronic do-gooder, always helping people with problems, with questions, with illness and infirmities. And He was so uninterested in life's comforts that He gave up a perfectly good trade as a carpenter. He seemed proud to declare He didn't even own a home or bed to lay His head. Which perspective - His or ours - do we think is closer to God's?

Once upon a time in the hills of Kentucky there was a mountaineer who had a reputation as a fabulous marksman. Anyone visiting his backwoods cabin could see all the evidences. Targets had been drawn on trees and fences all over. In every case a single rifle shot had hit directly in the center of each target. The marksman's prowess became quite a legend. Then someone thought to ask him how he did it. How did he get the bullet dead center in the target every time? "Well," he drawled, "I just take aim at a tree or a fence post or something and if I hit it then I take a pencil and draw some circles around the bullet hole." A lot of people live that way. Whatever they achieve, they draw a circle around it and spend the rest of their lives rationalizing, defending as fact that they hit the right target dead center. That's one way to prove to yourself that your life aim is on target.

The truth, however, is that our perspective on life is limited and imperfect. Often we are in error according to God's values and we aim at the wrong target. Often we settle for trying to justify the target we happen to hit. Then the tax collector's prayer is very much in order: "God, have mercy on a sinner like me."

But the correct target is there in view. It is right there in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. That is what Easter proves. A few minutes ago we read responsively a description of the target, the Beatitudes. We read that these are the life qualities for blessedness, for happiness: humility, feeling sorrow, gentleness, concern for justice, being merciful, being sincere, working for peace, suffering for the cause of goodness.

Again we Christians have come past Easter - the supreme proof of God's goodness and love. Again we have been shown our target for life. Our task now with Easter past is to re-sight our lives, to check that we are aiming accurately at the right target.

Amen.

Our heavenly Father, we thank you for proving in the resurrection that the life of Jesus is the target showing us the way to aim for true life. Focusing our lives on Him, may we share in the Easter victory of Christ.

Amen.